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AUTHOR	Reagan, Timothy
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ABSTRACT

This article addresses a number of common confusions that characterize much of the debate about the status of American Sign Language (ASL) as a foreign language option. The article begins with a broad overview of the nature and characteristics of different kinds of signing as they are used in the deaf culture and between the deaf and hearing worlds. Next it moves to a discussion of some of the concerns and issues that have been raised in recent years with respect to the question of whether learning to sign ought to count as a foreign language in various American educational institutions and settings. It then focuses on the issue of selecting and evaluating both instructors and curricular materials for ASL classes. It concludes with an explanation of some of the political and ideological issues that the inclusion of ASL as a foreign language appears to have raised. Deaf culture and its relationship with the wider society is discussed at length in postmodern, critical terms. (Contains 98 references.) (KFT)

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But Does It *Count?*: Reflections on "Signing" as a Foreign Language

Dr. Timothy Reagan
The University of Connecticut

Abstract

This article addresses a number of common confusions that characterize much of the debate about the status of American Sign Language (ASL) as a foreign language option. The article begins with a broad overview of the nature and characteristics different kinds of signing as they are used in the Deaf culture and between the Deaf and hearing worlds. Next, it moves to a discussion of some of the concerns and issues that have been raised in recent years with respect to the question of whether learning to sign ought to "count" as a foreign language in various sorts of American educational institutions and settings. It then focuses on the issue of selecting and evaluating both instructors and curricular materials for ASL classes. It concludes with an exploration of some of the political and ideological issues that the inclusion of ASL as a foreign language appears to have raised.

Introduction

In my twenty-plus years as a foreign language educator, no one has ever asked me whether Russian is a language. Nor have I been asked about French, German, Spanish, or a host of other common and less-common languages. And yet, for the past fifteen years, ever since I first set foot on the campus of Gallaudet University as a new faculty member and began learning to sign, I have often been asked that question about "signing." "Is sign a language? Does it really *count* as a language?" My standard, off-the-cuff answer is most often a simple, "yes, of course it's a language," but that response involves a great deal of personal and professional baggage, just as the question almost inevitably carries with it a fair amount of ignorance. The baggage involved is my training and background as an applied linguist and foreign language educator, coupled with my own experiences as a learner and user of several kinds of

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sign. The ignorance involved in the question involves at least three levels of confusion: 1) confusion about the nature of signed languages in general, and of American Sign Language (ASL) in particular; 2) confusion about the purposes of studying languages other than one's own in general, especially as they relate to sign language; and finally 3) confusion about decision making involving the selection and evaluation of both curricula and instructors for sign languages.

This article addresses all three levels of confusion. I begin by presenting a broad overview of the nature and characteristics of different kinds of signing as they are used in the Deaf culture and between the Deaf and hearing worlds.[1] Next, I discuss some of the concerns and issues that have been raised in recent years concerning whether learning to sign ought to "count" as a foreign language in various sorts of American educational institutions and settings. The issue of selecting and evaluating both instructors and curricular materials for the ASL class is then explored, followed by an examination of some of the political and ideological issues that the inclusion of ASL as a foreign language has raised.

For those who expect a clear, resonant, and simple resolution to the problem presented by the status of signing as a foreign language, a warning is appropriate. Although, as will become clear, I am a strong advocate of ASL, my position is predicated on a clear understanding of what, exactly, is meant by "American Sign Language," as opposed to simply "signing." All forms of manual communication are *not* equal, nor are all entitled to the same status educationally, linguistically, or even legally. As H. L. Mencken once observed, "There is always a well-known solution to every human problem--neat, plausible, and wrong." This is certainly true with respect to deciding whether sign should "count" as a foreign language. The case of sign language is a complex one, and requires a more nuanced and complex response than both its critics and its supporters often provide.

What is "Sign Language"? Toward a Typology of Signing

To understand the issues underlying the contemporary debate about the status of ASL as a foreign language in American educational institutions, we must look at the nature

and variety of signed languages present in the United States and abroad. Terms such as "signing," "signed language" and "sign language" are both vague and ambiguous in nature.They lead to a great deal of confusion about the different kinds of gestural/visual communication systems used by Deaf people. Broadly speaking, there are three very distinctive *kinds* of signing used by Deaf people and the hearing people with whom they have contact.[2] There are natural sign languages, pidgin sign languages, and manual sign codes. Each type of sign language is characterized by significant and meaningful differences from the other types, and each one tends to be used in different kinds of social and cultural contexts and for different kinds of purposes.

Natural sign languages are those used in Deaf communities in communicative interactions between, and among, Deaf people themselves. Such natural sign languages, including ASL, Australian Sign Language, British Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, French Sign Language, Russian Sign Language, South African Sign Language, and so on, are immensely complex linguistically.[3] It is these natural sign languages that constitute "sign language" in its strongest sense (see Reagan, 1990b). These languages have emerged and evolved naturally, and, as Sherman Wilcox has noted, "are fully developed human languages independent of the languages spoken in the linguistic communities in the same region" (1990, p. 141). Furthermore, different natural sign languages are related to one another in different ways, just as are spoken languages. We can talk about sign language families, which would consist of historically related natural sign languages (such as ASL and French Sign Language), and contrast these to historically unrelated natural sign languages (for example, ASL and British Sign Language). It is worth noting here, as these examples demonstrate, that the relationships between natural sign languages can, and do, differ dramatically from those of spoken languages. Thus, although they may share a written language (English), Deaf people in the U.S. and Britain in fact use unrelated natural sign languages.

Since the 1960 publication of William Stokoe's landmark study, *Sign Language Structures* (see Stokoe, 1993), there has been a veritable explosion of linguistic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic research dealing with ASL, as well as with other natural sign

languages (see Battison, 1978; Emmorey & Reilly, 1995; Fischer & Siple, 1990; Friedman, 1977; Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Kyle & Woll, 1983, 1985; Liddell, 1980; Lillo-Martin, 1991; Lucas, 1989; Schlesinger & Namir, 1978; Siple, 1978; Siple & Fischer, 1991; Valli & Lucas, 1995). The result is that we know far more about the nature and workings of natural sign languages than we did thirty years ago, and the now well-established research base has been summarized by Robert Hoffmeister as follows:

> ASL is a language that has been misunderstood, misused, and misrepresented over the past 100 years. It is structured very differently from English. The structure of ASL is based on visual/manual properties, in contrast to the auditory/spoken properties of English. ASL is able to convey the same meanings, information, and complexities as English. The mode of expression is different, but only at the delivery level. The underlying principles of ASL . . . are based on the same basic principles found in all languages. ASL is able to identify and codify agents, actions, objects, locations, subjects, verbs, aspects, tense, and modality, just as English does. ASL is therefore capable of stating all the information expressed in English and of doing this within the same conceptual frame. ASL is able to communicate the meaning of a concept, through a single sign or through a combination of signs, that may be conveyed by a word or phrase (combination of words) in English. (1990, p. 81)

In fact, as a result of this growing body of research concerned with the linguistics of natural sign languages, a 1985 UNESCO report went so far as to assert as an operating principle that, "We must recognize the legitimacy of the sign language as a linguistic system and it should be accorded the same status as other languages" (quoted in Lane, 1992, p. 46). To sum up, then, the evidence is clear that ASL is a legitimate language comparable in all significant ways to spoken languages. Although it utilizes a modality different from that employed by spoken languages, its operation is in no way inferior to spoken languages. Further, lest one think that students studying ASL are taking an "easy out" and avoiding the difficulties of learning a foreign language, recent research

suggests that acquiring ASL actually may be somewhat more difficult than learning a foreign spoken language (see Jacobs, 1996; McKee & McKee, 1992).

Pidgin sign languages are precisely what their name implies: they are pidgins, combining elements from both a natural sign language and elements (in a manual/gestural form) from a spoken language. They are the most common form of sign language used in communicative interactions between hearing and Deaf people (Reilly & McIntire, 1980; Supalla & Webb, 1995; Woodward, 1973). In fact, the vast majority of hearing people who sign utilize some variety of pidgin sign language, as do Deaf people in most of their contacts with the hearing world. Pidgin sign languages are in essence contact languages, straddling two worlds. As a result, pidgin sign languages generally constitute a fairly wide continuum of actual signing practices and elements, ranging from strong ties to the natural sign language, all the way to strong ties to the spoken language. This means that even when hearing and Deaf people are communicating using a pidgin sign language, they are actually likely to exhibit significantly different linguistic behaviors. The great advantage of pidgin sign languages, of course, is ease of acquisition: it is far easier for a hearing person to become reasonably competent in a pidgin sign language than in a natural sign language.

Finally, there are manual sign codes. They are, in essence, artificially constructed linguistic systems designed to allow a given spoken language to be represented in a visual/gestural mode (see Reagan, 1995b). Manual sign codes are widely used in educational settings, especially with young children, as a way of providing more meaningful access to the spoken language than oral methods might achieve. The best-known and most widely used manual sign code in the United States is Signing Exact English (SEE-2), but a number of other codes exist in the U. S. and elsewhere in the world, both for English and other spoken languages (Bornstein, 1990; Gustason & Woodward, 1973; Ramsey, 1989).

Natural sign languages, pidgin sign languages, and manual sign codes are distinguishable from one another in at least five significant ways: the nature of lexical items, word order, the presence or absence of inflectional markers, the use of voicing,

and the use of non-manual elements to convey lexical, morphological, and syntactic information. Each of these areas will now be briefly explored.

The Nature of Lexical Items. Individual signs can be either conceptual or word-based in nature (see Reagan, 1986). In natural sign languages and pidgin sign languages, signs are generally conceptual in nature. That is, a given sign will correspond to a specific concept in another language. In translating a sign from a natural sign language into a spoken language, we may find that the sign includes several conceptually related words in the spoken language. Depending on usage and context, the ASL sign CONTROL, for instance, can be translated into English as "control," "direct," "manage," "administer," "govern," "operate," "regulate," or even "manipulate." On the other hand, there are instances in which the spoken language uses a single word to express a number of different or distinct concepts. In such situations, conceptually-based signs in a natural sign language may be more precise than the spoken language allows. In ASL, for example, the English word "run" requires different signs for each of the following uses:

run in a race
run for Congress
a run in a stocking
to run a business
running water
a runny nose

There is nothing here that is particularly noteworthy or exceptional, of course: precisely the same kinds of lexical variation are found between any two languages (consider, for instance, *ser* and *estar* in Spanish, while English makes due with a single verb). However, the situation changes as we move from natural sign languages and pidgin sign languages to manual sign codes. In general, manual sign codes tend to follow the rule "one word = one sign." In other words, to manually encode English, all of the different signs for "run" will be collapsed into a single sign. Similarly, if English requires separate words for "control," "govern," and so on, then the manual sign code

must find a way to represent each of these terms as a separate lexical item (Baker & Padden, 1978).

Word Order. The order in which lexical items occur in a natural sign language differs from word order in a spoken language, just as word order varies between different spoken languages. Word order can provide a clear differentiation between a natural sign language, on the one hand, and pidgin sign languages and manual sign codes on the other. The former utilizes a very distinctive word order, while the latter two generally follow the word order of the spoken language. A related aspect of the structure of natural sign languages is their capacity to use more than one sign simultaneously--a linguistic behavior simply not possible in a spoken language. Consider the following differences in word order for the English sentence, "I have eaten":

American Sign Language: FINISH ME (right hand) EAT (left hand)

Pidgin Sign English: I FINISH EAT.

Manual Sign Code: I(i) HAVE(V) EAT + (N).

Presence or Absence of Inflectional Markers. Unlike natural sign languages and pidgin sign languages, manual sign codes, as can be seen in the example above, make extensive use of inflectional markers to represent specific syntactic and morphological information conveyed in the spoken language (Gustason & Woodward, 1973). For example, manual sign codes designed to represent English will contain inflectional markers for such morphological items as: -ing, -s (plural), -'s (possessive), -ed, and so on. Further, grammatical irregularities in the spoken language will be fully maintained in the manual sign code, as in the use of distinct, initialized markers for "am," "is," and "are." Such inflectional markers are absent in natural sign languages altogether and are only rarely used in pidgin sign languages.

The Use of Voicing. Voicing, or using a spoken language at the same time that one signs--or even simply mouthing the words of the spoken language--takes place as a mandatory feature of manual sign codes, and is generally an option in pidgin sign

languages. For a variety of reasons, including differences in word order, it is not possible to use a natural sign language in conjunction with spoken language.

Non-Manual Components. Just as spoken languages are based on phonological differences and distinctions, signed languages are based on cheremic distinctions (which, in the linguistic literature, are often simply called phonological distinctions since they perform the same functions) (see Fischer & Siple, 1990; Valli & Lucas, 1995). The cheremic parameters of any given sign are hand shape, hand movement, hand position/location, palm orientation, and non-manual components (Battison, 1980). These cheremes function in natural sign languages and pidgin sign languages in roughly the same manner as do phonemes in spoken languages, save that they occur more or less simultaneously. Manual sign codes generally ignore non-manual cheremic features of signs (e.g., facial expression), and they are far less sensitive to marked cheremic combinations normally avoided by natural sign languages and, to a lesser degree, pidgin sign languages.

The presence of three types of signed languages has resulted in the emergence in many Deaf communities of an unusual kind of diglossia, in which most Deaf individuals are not only bilingual to some degree, but also trimodal in their language use (Deuchar, 1977; Kannapell, 1993; Reagan, 1985, 1992). The relationship among the three types of sign language is, similarly, often a fairly complex one.

ASL and the Purposes of Foreign Language Study

The past two decades have witnessed a growing interest in, and concern with, the status of ASL both in universities and in public schools. Wilcox & Wilcox (1997, p. 51), for instance, report an increase in enrollment in ASL courses at the post-secondary level of 181% over a five year period in the 1980s, and enrollments have continued to rise since that time. This increased enrollment in ASL courses has been reflected in the publication of a wide variety of very good textbooks designed to teach hearing people ASL (see Baker & Cokely, 1980; Humphries, Padden & O'Rourke, 1980; Kettrick, 1984). Furthermore, a number of state legislatures have passed legislation explicitly recognizing ASL as a distinct language in its own right, and there appears to be a

growing recognition and understanding of the deaf as a cultural and linguistic community among hearing people (see Lane, 1992; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Reagan, 1985; 1990a; Sacks, 1989; Wilcox, 1988; Wilcox & Wilcox, 1997). At the same time, however, there has been a powerful backlash to such developments, seen most clearly in the resistance among many educators (and especially many foreign language teachers) to the inclusion of ASL as a foreign language option in both secondary schools and universities. Typical of this backlash was the decision in the early 1990s of the Pacific Northwest Foreign Language Teachers Association to oppose allowing ASL to fulfill academic foreign language requirements ("Sign language," 1992).

The most common objections to including ASL as a foreign language in both secondary and post-secondary institutions fall into four broad categories: 1) the nature of ASL (that is, its status linguistically and psycholinguistically), 2) the degree to which ASL can be considered to be "foreign," 3) the degree to which advocates of ASL use the concepts of "language" and "culture" metaphorically rather than literally, and 4) the appropriateness of a non-written language for students to study, given the purposes of foreign language instruction in educational settings. Let us examine these objections and suggest responses to each one.

Many objections to the teaching of ASL as a foreign language, as well as to its use in the education of deaf children, are based on the belief that ASL is linguistically and psycholinguistically inferior to spoken language.[4] Characteristic of this view is Myklebust's assertion that, "Sign language cannot be considered comparable to a verbal symbol system" (1964, p.158, quoted in Lane, 1992, p. 45), and, more recently, van Uden's claim that, "The informative power of the natural sign language of the deaf is extremely weak" (1986, p. 89). Such views are far from uncommon, as Markowicz has noted, "American Sign Language is often described in the following ways: It is a universal language whose grammar is poor compared to that of spoken language; its vocabulary is concrete and iconic; it consists of gestures accompanied by facial expressions" (1980, p. 1). However common and popular such views may be, though,

they are nonetheless clearly and demonstrably false both in spirit and detail, as we have already seen.

Among the more intriguing objections to counting ASL as a foreign language that have been raised in recent years is that offered by Howard Mancing, head of the foreign language department at Purdue University. Professor Mancing argued that:

> In no way do I impugn the integrity of ASL as a legitimate academic subject or as a well-developed, intellectual, emotional, subtle, sophisticated language . . . It is all of that, but since it is American Sign Language it is not foreign by definition. (Quoted in "Sign language," 1992)

The issue raised by Professor Mancing is one of definition, and what he has essentially done is to employ a programmatic definition, as if it were a reportive definition, in order to exclude ASL (see Scheffler, 1960, pp. 11-35; Hamm, 1989, pp. 10-15). The obvious ordinary language sense of "foreign" in the term "foreign language" is that the language is foreign to the learner. Professor Mancing's definition would require the exclusion of native American languages, such as Navajo, and even, perhaps, Spanish, which is arguably as "indigenous" to North America as English and is certainly widely spoken as a native language in the United States. In short, although the argument that ASL is not foreign may initially appear to be compelling, this is in fact far from the case. The extent to which a particular language is foreign has to do with the extent to which it is new or different to the learner. The danger in the argument presented by Professor Mancing is that by granting the legitimacy of ASL as a language, but denying its foreignness, one is presented with what falsely appears to be a balanced position.

Traditional defenses for the study of foreign languages as a part of a liberal education often rely on the close connection of language and culture. It is argued that only through the study of a people's language can their culture be properly understood, and that such study can provide an essential international or global component in an individual's education. Critics of the acceptance of ASL as a foreign language have suggested that ASL does not meet this aspect of foreign language education on two

counts: first, because the terms language and culture, when applied to ASL and the culture of the deaf community, are used metaphorically rather than literally; and second, because it is an indigenous rather than international language. As Thomas Kerth, chairman of the German and Slavic Languages Department at SUNY, Stony Brook, explained:

> I think these people who talk about deaf culture and foreignness are using it in a metaphorical way, not literally, and when you get into the realm of metaphor the meaning gets obscured. Most would read a foreign language as one not spoken by Americans. (Quoted in "Sign language," 1992)

The claim that discussions of the deaf culture are metaphorical rather than literal is a serious distortion of what writers on that culture have actually said and meant (see, for instance, Cohen, 1994; Gregory & Hartley, 1991; Janesick & Moores, 1992; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996; Reagan, 1988, 1995a; Wilcox, 1989). A number of works devoted to the history, sociology, and anthropology of the cultural community of the American deaf community have been written by both deaf and hearing scholars. These writings do not suggest that the concept of "cultural Deafness" is to be understood metaphorically; indeed, they use the term in an absolutely literal sense. The deaf community is a cultural community in precisely the same way that Mexican Americans or African Americans are cultural communities (see Baker & Battison, 1980; Lane, 1992; Lucas, 1989; Neisser, 1983; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Reagan, 1985, 1990a; Sacks, 1989; Schein, 1989; Stokoe, 1980; Woodward, 1982).

Professor Kerth's second claim is closely related to the idea that ASL is not foreign. However, here the suggestion is that since ASL is used almost exclusively in North America, it cannot provide students with an international or global perspective. This is true in the case of ASL, of course, to the same extent that it is a valid criticism of the study of the indigenous languages and cultures of North America. The study of the Hopi, for instance, is also not international in the narrow sense that is being applied to ASL and the deaf community. However, I would suggest that the point of such an

international requirement in a student's education is to expose the student to cultures and languages different from his or her own, and that there is no logical reason for this exposure necessarily to entail study of a culture and language of a different country. One of the more common arguments, at least at the tertiary level, against accepting ASL as a foreign language has been that it is not a written language, and hence does not have a literature to which students can be exposed. This objection actually has two separate components: first, the claim that ASL is not a written language; and second, that it does not possess a literature. Technically, ASL can be considered a written language--there actually are several notational systems that can be used for reducing it to written form (see, e.g., McIntire, Newkirk, Hutchins, & Poizner, 1987; Newkirk, 1987; Stokoe, Casterline & Croneberg, 1965; Sutton, 1981). However, it is true that ASL is not a *commonly* written language. Indeed, the written language of the American deaf community is in fact English. Having granted, then, this first objection, what of the second--that is, the lack of a literature in ASL?

Since ASL is not normally written down, it obviously does not have a written literature in the way that French, German, Russian, and English, amongst others, do. Of course, the same might be said of the vast majority of the languages currently spoken around the world. What ASL does have, in common with most non-western languages, is a literary tradition comparable to the oral traditions found in spoken languages (see Bahan, 1992; Jacobowitz, 1992; Low, 1992; Rutherford, 1993). Nancy Frishberg, for instance, has identified three major indigenous literary genres in ASL: oratory, folklore and performance art. Frishberg compellingly argued that:

> ASL has been excluded from fulfilling foreign or second language requirements in some institutions because of claims that it has no . . . tradition of literature . . . [However,] a literary aesthetic can be defined prior to a written literary tradition, as in the case of Greek and Balkan epic poetry. We know that other languages which are socially stigmatized nonetheless adapt literature through translation and develop their own literary institutions. Non-Western cultures without writing traditions

> convey their traditions of history and philosophy within community-defined forms of expression. And, finally, the presence or absence of writing (systematized orthography) has little relationship to the existence of a traditional verbal art form. (1988, pp. 165-166)

Further, it can be argued that the advent of the movie camera, and, more recently, the VCR, has made possible the compilation of the literary traditions and even the canon of ASL in a way not possible before this century. In short, ASL does have a well-developed literature, albeit one not easily reducible to a written form, that is now both accessible and worthy of serious study.

What has been argued here thus far is that the rejection of ASL as a foreign language for secondary and post-secondary students in the United States is based on a number of assumptions that, upon examination, prove to be both empirically and conceptually problematic. Further, we have shown that resistance to ASL is grounded in large part in a misunderstanding of the nature of human language and human communication, of the purposes which underlie academic language requirements, and of the nature, structure and history of natural sign languages in general and ASL in particular. In other words, objections to ASL as a legitimate foreign language for American students to study are misguided, misleading and inappropriate.

The debate is not, however, simply a matter of misunderstanding. Rather, it reflects more general issues of language and cultural rights in our society, and the way in which such rights are often ignored. What is actually at issue in this debate is the question of how the "Other" in our society is perceived and treated, and the extent to which the dominant society is willing seriously to countenance pluralism (see Reagan, 1997). By rejecting ASL as a legitimate foreign language, we in essence run the risk of being perceived to reject the Deaf community, its culture, and its language. This view was stated clearly and cogently nearly one hundred years ago by Robert McGregor, the first president of the National Association of the Deaf, when he argued that:

> The utmost extreme to which tyranny can go when its mailed hand descends upon a conquered people is the proscription of their national

> language . . . But all the attempts to suppress signs, wherever tried, have most signally failed. After a hundred years of proscription . . . they still flourish, and will continue to flourish to the end of time . . . What heinous crime have the deaf been guilty of that their language should be proscribed? (Quoted in Lane, 1984, p. xvii)

The rejection of ASL, in short, can be seen as an example of the tyranny of the majority. For culturally and linguistically Deaf people, and for the hearing people who wish to understand them better on their own terms, such a rejection merely reinforces the traditional, pathological view of deafness and the Deaf. Perhaps even more than the harm that it does to Deaf people and their culture, though, is the harm that it will do to hearing people and their culture. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once noted about apartheid-era South Africa, "at present nobody is really free; nobody will be really free until Blacks are free. Freedom is indivisible" (1983, p. 45). The same is true with regard to the rights of dominated cultural and linguistic minority groups in our own society, and it certainly applies to the case of ASL and the deaf. The rejection of ASL as a foreign language option in many secondary and post-secondary schools in American society, in sum, provides ample evidence of how far we still have to go in learning to recognize and respect the rights of others in our society.

Even if the rejection of ASL is unwarranted, though, that fact hardly constitutes a particularly good case for making it available to students. The same arguments, after all, would apply to virtually any language. Why, then, should we use scarce resources to teach ASL rather than, say, Xhosa or Kurdish? The answer is a simple one: demand. There is in fact a demonstrable demand for ASL classes, and many students do wish to study ASL and gain at least some level of competence in it. To be sure, such interest is very often tied to vocational plans, but the same is true for enrollments in other foreign languages.

Selecting Teachers and Materials for the ASL Class

Recognizing the legitimacy and appropriateness of the study of ASL as a foreign language is one thing; deciding how to select a competent instructor, develop a

reasonable, academically defensible curriculum, and so on, constitute quite another challenge. To some extent, of course, the problems are not unique to the case of ASL--they are also common to other less commonly taught languages (see Everson, 1993; Grin, 1993; Ihde, 1997; Jordan & Walton, 1987), and, indeed, all too often apply even to commonly taught languages. In the case of ASL, fortunately, there are some fairly easy steps that can be taken and guidelines that can be followed to ensure the academic credibility of both instructors and curricula.

The most direct and reliable method of evaluating instructor competence to teach ASL is certification by the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA). In a survey conducted of members of ASLTA in the early 1990s, though, under one-third of the respondents reported having either ASLTA certification or certification from ASLTA's predecessor organization SIGN, and this seems to be fairly consistent with anecdotal experience (see Newell, 1995a, 1995b). As William Newell has commented, "Certification is another indicator of involvement in the profession. Certification . . . has been somewhat limited over the years since the inception of the certification process . . . the percentage of certified to non-certified teachers remains low" (1995a, p. 27).

Apart from formal certification by ASLTA, however, there are a number of general characteristics and skills that have been identified as essential for teachers of ASL. Jan Kanda and Larry Fleischer have suggested that the answer to the question, "What makes one qualified to teach ASL?" includes the following:

> Linguistic and cultural competence undergirded by interaction with members of the Deaf community and accompanied by proper attitudinal characteristics are prerequisite. In addition, an ASL teacher should be educated, demonstrating knowledge and application of educational and pedagogical principles along with formal study of the language being taught. Sign language teachers should be able to integrate second language teaching theory and methodology in their classrooms. They should be engaged in activities leading to personal and professional growth and development. (1988, p. 193)

Clearly, this list provides some valuable guidelines for selecting an ASL instructor. The individual, first and foremost, must be a fluent user of ASL and must be able to demonstrate a high level of contact with, and integration in, the Deaf community. He or she must also have some degree of formal training in ASL; native speakers may well become outstanding teachers, but formal study of the language is nonetheless necessary, especially in a case such as ASL where the linguistic norms of the language are not always clear-cut. Pedagogical training also plays a key part here; merely knowing a language well does not always translate into effective second language teaching. This fact is particularly important, since many practicing ASL instructors were in fact trained and certified as interpreters rather than as ASL teachers. The difference is significant; the roles are quite different, and the training does not, by any means, automatically transfer. Finally, a word about using Deaf instructors to teach ASL: although obviously many hearing people can teach ASL, and can do so well, there are often immense advantages for students studying ASL with a teacher who is him/herself Deaf.

Turning now to the curriculum itself, it is important to emphasize that the teaching of ASL requires texts and materials designed to teach ASL. This might be considered a rather obvious point, except that the vast majority of curricular materials available for teaching and learning sign language are not, in fact, ASL materials--they are either materials designed for a specific manual code, or for pidgin sign. Typical texts of this latter type are most often labeled with terms such as "manual communication," "signed English," or simply "Signing." Such texts have their place, of course, but not in the teaching and learning of ASL. Fortunately, in recent years a number of excellent textbooks have appeared for students actually studying ASL. Among these works are Tom Humphries and Carol Padden's *Learning American Sign Language*, Tom Humphries, Carol Padden and Terrence O'Rourke's *A Basic Course in American Sign Language*, Cartherine Kettrick's *American Sign Language: A Beginning Course*, and, of course, Charlotte Baker and Dennis Cokely's *American Sign Language* multimedia package. Whatever textbook is chosen, the curriculum of the ASL course should reflect four

broad areas: cultural awareness, grammatical features of ASL, the lexicon of ASL, and practice with ASL conversational skills (see Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1980, pp. 141-162). The curriculum should also be carefully articulated from one level to the next. This raises another significant point: an ASL curriculum focusing on communicative competence will require roughly the same kind of time commitment as would be required by a spoken language. Thus, one-semester or even one-year courses in ASL can, at best, provide a solid foundation for further language learning; if competence in ASL is the goal, a multi-year program is essential.

None of this, of course, in any way distinguishes the ASL curriculum from any other good second language curriculum--the standards for good, effective second language teaching and learning are the same across languages. The specific content within each of the four broad areas of the curriculum, however, is likely to be somewhat unfamiliar to foreign language educators who are not themselves knowledgeable about ASL and sign language. With this caveat in mind, here are the sorts of topics and issues that one would normally expect to find covered in a well-constructed first-year ASL curriculum (see Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1980; Humphries & Padden, 1992; Humphries, Padden & O'Rourke, 1980; Kettrick, 1984):

Cultural Awareness of the Deaf Community

- History of ASL
- Paradigms of Deafness: Medical and Sociocultural
- The Nature and History of the Deaf Community
- The Nature and Elements of Deaf Culture
- The Role of ASL in the Deaf Culture

Grammatical Features of ASL

- Sentence Types:
  - Statements
  - Questions (Yes/No, WH-, Rhetorical)
  - Commands
  - Conditionals

- Negation and Negative Incorporation
- Assertion
- Topicalization
- Relative Clauses
- Subjects and Objects

Time:

- Relative Time and the "Time Line"
- Time-Related Signs (Regularity, Duration, Approximate/Relative Time, Repetition, Duration)
- Tense
- Temporal Aspect

Pronominalization:

- Present and Non-Present People, Things, Places
- Indexing and Eye-Indexing
- Possessive Reference
- Reflexive/Emphatic Reference
- Demonstrative Reference
- Establishing Referents in Space
- Distributional Aspect
- Number Incorporation

Classifiers:

- Pluralization
- Descriptive Classifiers: Size and Shape, Instrument, Locational Relationships
- Conventional Use of Classifiers
- Quantitative Classifiers
- The Role of Signer Perspective in Classifier Use

Locatives:

- Classifiers

Directional Verbs

Indexing

Separate Locative Signs

The Lexicon of ASL

Sign Formation and Variation

Types of Signs:

Nouns and Noun Pairs

Verbs and Verb Pairs

Compounds and Contractions

Fingerspelled Loan Signs

Initialized Signs

Idiomatic Expressions

Sign "Families"

The Role of Fingerspelling

Lexical Spheres

Practice with ASL Conversational Skills

Interacting with Deaf People

Politeness

Interruptions and Apologies

Name Signs

Although obviously not inclusive, the above list does provide a reasonable amount of guidance with respect to the broad characteristics and topics that should be included within the context of a first-year ASL course.

Concluding Reflections: The Political and Ideological Context of the Debate

The North American Deaf community is by far among the most organized and successful in the world, but it is by no means unique in either its fundamental nature or in its objectives. Comparable Deaf cultural communities exist throughout the world, distinguished both from one another by their respective languages and cultural contexts and from the surrounding hearing communities with which they interact (see Fischer &

Lane, 1993; Kyle & Woll, 1985). In North America and elsewhere, an extensive, and rapidly growing literature has not only documented but also begun analyzing each of the many elements of the Deaf cultural community. Central to such efforts have been the study and analysis of natural sign languages. Although the growth in our knowledge about the cultures and languages of the Deaf is certainly both impressive and valuable, it is perhaps less significant than the themes which underlie it. Central to these themes has been the concern with the role of language in domination and power relations as they relate to deaf-hearing interaction (see Foucault, 1972; Ball, 1990). As Harlan Lane, speaking not only for himself but for many scholars concerned with the Deaf as a cultural and linguistic community, has argued:

> I maintain that the vocabulary and conceptual framework our society has customarily used with regard to deaf people, based as it is on infirmity, serves us and the members of the deaf community less well than a vocabulary and framework of cultural relativity. I want to replace the normativeness of medicine with the curiosity of ethnography. (1992, p. 19)

Also of significance in understanding a sociocultural model of deafness is the rejection by advocates of this view of the paternalism that has tended to characterize discussions which take place within the more common pathological model of deafness. As Harlan Hahn has compellingly argued with respect to paternalism toward disabled people in general,

> Paternalism enables the dominant elements of a society to express profound and sincere sympathy for the members of a minority group while, at the same time, keeping them in a position of social and economic subordination. It has allowed the nondisabled to act as the protectors, guides, leaders, role-models, and intermediaries for disabled individuals who, like children, are often assumed to be helpless, dependent, asexual, economically unproductive, physically limited, emotionally immature, and acceptable only when they are unobtrusive . . . Politically, disabled people usually have been neither seen nor heard. Paternalistic attitudes,

> therefore, may be primarily responsible both for the ironic invisibility of disabled persons and for the prior tendency to ignore this important area of public policy. (1986, p. 130)

Applying this concern with paternalism to the specific case of the Deaf, we find that:

> Like the paternalism of the colonizers, hearing paternalism begins with defective perception, because it superimposes its image of the familiar world of hearing people on the unfamiliar world of deaf people. Hearing paternalism likewise sees its task as "civilizing" its charges: restoring deaf people to society. And hearing paternalism fails to understand the structure and values of deaf society. The hearing people who control the affairs of deaf children and adults commonly do not know deaf people and do not want to. Since they cannot see deaf people as they really are, they make up imaginary deaf people of their own, in accord with their own experiences and needs. Paternalism deals in such stereotypes. (Lane, 1992, p. 37)

Challenging all forms of paternalism is an important task for educators, and the study of any second language can be a valuable tool in accomplishing this task (see Reagan & Osborn, 1998). The study of language serves many purposes, amongst which are not only cultural, cognitive, and communicative purposes, but also political and ideological purposes (see, for instance, Pennycook, 1994, 1998; Phillipson, 1992). Foreign language study can and should play a key role in empowering students in a variety of different ways. In every way that this empowerment can be accomplished using a traditional foreign language, it can also be accomplished utilizing ASL as the target language.

Notes

1. In this article, I follow the common practice of distinguishing between audiological *deafness*, which is represented with a lowercase "d," and cultural *Deafness*, which is represented with an uppercase "D." Although this is not the place for the case to be

argued, the question of whether the Deaf community constitutes a "culture" in an anthropological sense is, in my view, beyond question. The Deaf cultural community is demonstrably characterized by the same kinds of elements that characterize any other cultural community, including a common, shared language (ASL), a shared awareness of Deaf cultural identity, distinctive behavioral norms and patterns, cultural artifacts, endogamous marital patterns, a shared historical knowledge and awareness, and a network of voluntary, in-group social organizations (see Baker & Battison, 1980; Lane, 1992; Lucas, 1989; Neisser, 1983; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Reagan, 1985, 1990a; Sacks, 1989; Schein, 1989; Stokoe, 1980; Woodward, 1982).

2. Excluded from our discussion here are sign systems created and used as supplementary forms of communication for hearing individuals and communities in various contexts (for example, the use of sign in monasteries, among Native Americans, and so on).

3. Although my focus here is primarily on the case of ASL, equivalent cases can be made for other natural sign languages. For examples of recent work on European sign languages, for instance, see Edmondson & Karlsson, 1990, Prillwitz & Vollhaber, 1990a, 1990b. Not only is there extensive and growing literature on the linguistics of such natural sign languages, but there is also growing focus on the both the politics and sociolinguistics of natural sign languages (see Lucas, 1989, 1995, 1996; Lucas & Valli, 1992; Penn & Reagan, 1990; Reagan & Penn, 1997).

4. Incidentally, it is this belief in the fundamental inferiority of signed language to spoken language that underlies much of the on-going debate in deaf education between those advocating oral approaches (in which signing is generally not allowed) and those supporting manual approaches (in which some type of signing is utilized). This debate, in turn, is reflective of the philosophical difference between those who conceive of deafness in medical terms as a pathological condition, and those who think of it in sociocultural terms.

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